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ABSTRACT

The social and literary representation of the unmarried woman of "a certain age"--the spinster--provides a convenient focus for observing the overall progress of all women in English life. As the single woman's stature increased in the esteem of her culture, English writers began to reflect the changing social attitudes by depicting her in ever more positive ways. The popular poetry of women writers which appeared in the giftbooks, magazines, and monographs that adorned middle- and upper-class drawing rooms in nineteenth century England provides another glimpse of how women themselves regarded the fame and fortunes of the ever-increasing number of spinsters among them. Women poets' attitudes toward the unmarried woman shifted from ridicule, to pity, to respect; finally, in the 1890s the spinster was replaced in prominence in the popular imagination by the competing figure of the "New Woman," a daring and controversial creature whom women poets by and large avoided depicting at all. The poetry of Adelaide Anne Procter, George Eliot, and Augusta Webster help to illustrate the change in attitudes toward the single woman. (HOD)

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The Spinster in Victoria's England: Changing Attitudes in Popular Poetry by Women

Queen Victoria came to the throne of England in 1837 and reigned for 64 years, until her death in 1901, just at the beginning of the twentieth century. During this critical period in England's adaptation to modern times, one important social change that occurred was the gradual upgrading of the status of women within the social structure. Women increasingly came to be regarded as independent human beings whose value to society and to themselves did not alone depend upon successful fulfillment of their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The social and literary representation of the unmarried woman of "a certain age"--the spinster--provides a convenient focus for observing the overall progress of all women in English life.

As the single woman's stature increased in the esteem of her culture, English writers began to reflect the changing social attitudes by depicting her in ever more positive ways. Important male writers like Tennyson and Dickens--and later, Gissing and Symons--rejected the eighteenth-century stereotype of the spinster as ridiculous and man-hungry, like Tabitha Bramble in Smollett's Humphry Clinker(1771). Instead, they expressed pity for her: consider Tennyson's "Mariana," Dickens's Miss Havisham in Great Expectations, or the poverty-stricken spinsters in Gissing's The Odd Women. But nineteenth-century readers--especially women readers--did not rely exclusively on eminent male writers like Tennyson

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and Dickens, or even on eminent female writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, to supply them with reading material. On the contrary, they also read a great deal of fiction and poetry written by women whose names may not be as readily recalled today when one lists the "major" writers of Victoria's reign, but whose literary productions were nonetheless quite well known in their own day.

In the interest of seeing how women themselves regarded the fame and fortunes of the ever-increasing number of spinsters among them, we can look at the popular poetry by women writers which appeared in the giftbooks, magazines, and monographs that adorned middle- and upper-class drawing-room tables in nineteenth-century England. English women were reading Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, Letitia Landon, Eliza Cook, Dora Greenwell, Adelaide Anne Procter, Augusta Webster, and many others as well. Most of these writers have received little or no attention in the past hundred years from casual readers, or from sociologists, or from literary critics and historians. Yet by tracing movements such as the rehabilitation of the spinster as it occurs in the writings of the most progressive of the popular women poets, we can see evidence of the metamorphosis in social attitudes towards women that took place in England during the century. To sum it up, women poets' attitudes towards the unmarried woman shifted from ricidule, to pity, to respect; finally, in the 1890's the spinster was replaced in prominence in the popular imagination by the competing figure of the "New Woman," a daring and controversial creature whom women poets by and large avoided depicting at all.

When nineteen-year-old Victoria took the throne in 1837, the average unmarried Englishwoman over 30 was essentially a social outcast, whose very existence violated the nineteenth-century expectation that every girl would do as Victoria herself soon did--marry and bear a large number of children. In

contrast, the spinster--especially if she were neither wealthy nor "protected" by a father, brother, or brother-in-law--found herself without a serious and socially acceptable purpose in life and frequently even without the means to live out her exile in comfort and security. While her legal rights were somewhat greater than those of married women, her opportunities for employment and for social contact were, especially early in the period, extremely limited. Contemporary opinion tended to write her off as an anomaly, one of the few but inevitable failures in the match-making business. However, as the century wore on, the number of English women who would never assume the expected role of wife and mother showed a steady and alarming increase, due to war, emigration, and differing mortality rates. By 1862, there were more than three quarters of a million surplus women; women for whom, statistically, no husbands existed; women who were, in the blunt assessment of social commentator W. R. Greg, "redundant."[1]

What should be done? Controversy settled around two alternate approaches to the single woman's problem, as Frances Power Cobbe explained :

> 1st. We must frankly accept this new state of things, and educate women and modify trade. . .so as to make the condition of celibacy as little injurious as possible; or,--
>
> 2nd. We must set ourselves vigorously to stop the current which is leading men and women away from the natural order of Providence. We must do nothing whatever to render celibacy easy or attractive; and we must make the utmost efforts to promote marriage by emigration of women to the colonies, and all other means in our power.[2]

Cobbe, who was herself a spinster, endorsed the first alternative; W. R. Greg and others insisted on the latter. Greg's scheme for transporting 400,000 women to the antipodes, though it attracted a few enthusiasts, failed, because it was short-sighted and unfeeling, and because it did not take into account certain practical and economic considerations. Instead, women made slow gains in various fields and levels of employment during the latter part of the cen-

tury, so that, by the advent of the "New Woman," spinsterhood was no longer the social or economic tragedy that it had been 75 years before.

Of course, the skewed ration of women to men was only one of a variety of explanations for the increase in spinsterhood. Greg cited the tendency, in the economic turmoil of the nineteenth century, for status-conscious middle-class men to postpone marriage until they felt financially secure (sometimes, as it turned out, indefinitely) and to fulfill their sexual needs through prostitutes and kept women. There was a complementary tendency among middle-class girls to reject suitors who could not establish for them households comparable to those their fathers had built up over perhaps twenty or thirty years. Furthermore, if a young woman was needed at home, then of course her duty as a daughter took precedence over her desire for a husband. "Many a girl," wrote Eliza Cook, "the only child of an otherwise lonely parent, the sole prop of a widowed father or mother, the solitary light of a fast decaying life, has given herself up with the noble devotion of woman, to cheer the last hours of those to whom she owed her life."[3] Such a vigil might extend throughout the courtship years, leaving the middle-aged woman all alone when the "aged parent" finally died. Some women, no doubt, avoided marriage because of individual circumstances. One thinks of Christina Rossetti, for example, or of Elizabeth Barrett, who, at age 30, was most assuredly a spinster, due to her own invalidism and to her father's protective mania. Susan Gorsky mentions also "the inability of a woman to marry because of unrequited love or the loss of her lover through unfaithfulness or death."[4]

Despite the prevailing belief that no woman was single from choice, some women undoubtedly preferred celibacy. Some were disillusioned with the state of marriage as an institution. Others, though mid-Victorian society would hardly have believed it, probably preferred to devote their lives to their work

rather than to a man and his children. Florence Nightingale, for example, rejected what her friends and family felt was a perfect match in order to apply herself primarily to her nursing. And, of course, many women simply were not asked to marry, because they were ugly or unpleasant, or because they were poor, or because, like the Brontë sisters, they lived modest young women's lives of virtual isolation from eligible young men.

At any rate, it is clear that, despite contemporary opinion, spinsterhood offered more compensation than it might at first appear to do, for some of the most respected and influential women of the century were "old maids." That there were not many, many more such women, since spinsters were becoming so numerous, was due to poor education for women, social pressures against female achievement, and, perhaps, lack of encouragement from within the family. Most of the women writers of the century were either spinsters, or middle-aged brides, or in some other way unmarried during their careers: widowed, separated, or divorced. Research conducted by Elaine Showalter has determined that "of women writers born between 1800 and 1900, a fairly constant proportion--about half--were unmarried." Furthermore, many of those who married did so late in life, after their professional reputations were already established.[5] As spinsters, these women found that more time was available to them for serious work than was available to married women.

Even single women with some great life work were not necessarily as pathetic and useless as the stereotype allowed. The maiden aunt, for instance, a purely domestic old maid, was a beloved and useful figure in many a large Victorian household. Eliza Cook described "the old maiden aunts round whom the children cluster for picture-books and ginger-bread, who are looked for so anxiously by the nephews and nieces at festivals and merry-makings and holidays. . . ."[6] These were women who performed the functions of a mother,

but with "the subtle difference of a looser emotional bond, a more detached attitude which was often beneficial, and yet who were more powerful and, above all, more enduring than tutor, governess, or nurse."[7] Or, if not domestically inclined, the single woman might be, as Cobbe described her, "an exceedingly cheerful personage, running about untrammelled by husband or children; now visiting her relatives' country houses, now taking her month in town, now off to a favourite pension on Lake Geneva, now scaling Vesuvius or the Pyramids."[8]

Thus the spinster's existence, despite the ignominy, could be independent, confortable, and productive, whatever her talents and interests might be. The crucial factor was, unfortunately, money. As Jane Austen remarked in Emma (1816), "A single woman with a narrow income must be a ridiculous old maid, the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else."[9] By the late century, women's opportunities and wages in some fields had increased to the point where it was possible to earn, rather than inherit, an income sufficient to insure respect. The social prejudices which made the single woman's life "dreary and monotonous," and made the woman herself a ridiculous or pitiable figure, had begun, however, slowly, to fade away.[10]

The literary fortunes of the spinster were somewhat slow in catching up. Eliza Cook's Journal for October, 1850, deplored the popular representations of the old maid:

> If you happen to see an engraving of an old sour-faced lady in close companionship with a pug dog, two cats and a parrot, you may be sure that it is meant for an old maid. If you happen to hear of an ancient dame who occupies her whole time in scandalizing and damaging the fair fame of her neighbours, be certain that the story is fated to end with the circumstance that she is an old maid. If you read of a prude, who is so squeamish that she cannot bear to hear of the slightest friendship between the sexes, you may at once make up your mind that she belongs to the sisterhood of old maids.

Cook felt that the "unprotected condition" of spinsters "ought to shield them

from, rather than expose them to, the prejudices of which they are made the victim,"[11] especially since, as she had previously observed, the single women of her acquaintance were generally "active, cultivated, energetic, judicious, . [and] widely benevolent."[12]

By 1862, when Cobbe asserted that the potential "utility, freedom, and happiness of a single woman's life"[13] had been socially acknowledged, the literary stereotype had just made the transition from derision to pity. Dora Greenwell noted the changing image of the single woman in literature, from "the withered prude" of Hogarth and Cowper to "the gentle, dovelike Old Maid, of smooth braided silvery hair and soft speech and eye, generally. . .dressed in grey, who is supposed to have some tender secret buried in her heart, . . .but who, ever serene and cheerful, flits in and out between the scenes, listening, consoling, cheering, at all times ready to take up a little of existence at second hand."[14]

The new social attitude of respect, rather than sympathy, was not, even in the seventies, translated into fiction. Rather, "the spinster of fiction. . . was still in the main considered, as Mrs.[Lynn]Linton impressively put it, 'as a violation of a natural law and the confessed inability of man to render nature and society harmonious.' The old maid had now to endure pitying headshakes rather than contemptuous smiles."[15] Alternatives to marriage were "few and, among heroines, either spring from or lead to disaster: the women in the novels do not avoid marriage by choice or consider the alternatives as attractions."[16] Even in the 1880's and 1890's "spinsters could not be heroines. They were at best. . . good but limited, or worthy but unpleasant."[17] So although we seldom find, in the nineteenth century, a fictional character like Tabitha Bramble, nevertheless, the image of the single woman is still negative. Typically, she is a pathetic and unfulfilled woman; and she is never more than a secondary

figure in the novel. When the single woman does become a novel's heroine, "spinsterhood and work prove to be only a trial period crowned by marriage, without which any woman's life is considered a failure."[18] Apparently, although the social stature of the spinster was truly improving, the idea that the middle-class woman might come to regard celibacy and independence with approval was still too threatening to evoke many positive depictions of the spinster in literature for middle-class readers.

Like fiction, nineteenth-century poetry did not, as a rule, expend much energy on the spinster. When the poetic heroine is an old maid, it is usually clear that the author of the poem either disapproves of her or pities her or both. A perfect example is Arthur Symons's "The Unloved." Written in 1896 and published in 1900, it is, at the end of the century, as stereotypical a depiction of the pathetic old maid as any in literature:

> These are the women whom no man has loved.
> Year after year, day after day has moved
> These hearts with many longings, and with tears,
> And with content; they have received the years
> With empty hands, expecting no good thing;
> Life has passed by their doors, not entering.[19]

Symons chronicles their daydreams of romantic love and conquest and their womanly regrets, "the rocking of the cradles in their hearts" (45). But when the melancholy mood passes, and the tears are dried, the old maids return to the chores with which they fill their days.

> . . . they resume the tale
> Of the dropt stitches; these must never fail
> For a dream's sake; nor, for a memory,
> The telling of a patient rosary.
> (47-50)

"The Unloved" illustrates the fact that the conventional poetic image of the spinster failed throughout the entirety of the century to keep pace with the changing social reality of the single woman's life.

We might expect that women poets, many of whom were themselves unmarried, would have represented the nineteenth-century spinster in a more nearly realistic fashion than male poets did; and such was occasionally, though not generally, the case. Surprisingly, most of the popular poetry written by and for women reflected the two conventional attitudes: ridicule and pathos. On the other hand, whether satiric or sentimental in method, these poems usually deplored, even while they depicted, the low social status of the "old maid"; and a few writers tried to challenge it by depicting the figure in some alternative manner.

Two poems published in 1837, the year of Victoria's accession, will serve to illustrate the satirical and sentimental modes of representing the spinster. The first, Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley's "I Am Come But Your Spirits to Raise," depicts a woman sinking into spinsterhood. It is a satiric poem with two female targets: the aging spinster and the hypocritical socialite. The latter is the speaker of the poem; she delivers her catty monologue during a social call on her friend Jane, whose father has just died. Protesting, "I came but your spirits to cheer," the visitor comments upon Jane's faded appearance and reminds her of all the fun she is missing while observing the obligatory period of mourning.

> To be sure, since your poor father's death,
> You've been locked up and blocked up at home,
> Like a sword left to rust in the sheath,
> Like a plant left to pine in the gloom
> . . . . . .
> Now your hair always hangs out of curl,
> All unconscious of riband or wreath;
> You are grown quite a different girl,
> Since your poor gouty father's sad death.

Neither Jane nor her visitor is perceptibly moved by the death. Jane's air of sadness is attributable to the fact that her friend has stolen her beau, Lord Arthur Lake, protesting all the while that she has encouraged him only for Jane's sake. A couple of stanzas will demonstrate how this feat has been

accomplished: through subtle criticism of Jane in implicit contrast with herself.

> Now he swears you wear loads of false hair,
> And I vow to him, love, 'tis your own,
> And assure him that sorrow and care
> Have now mixed some grey hairs with the brown.
>
> He protests, too, you rouged--so I say
> That if ever you did, you don't now--
> For your colour is quite gone away,
> And like parchment your cheek and your brow.
>
> And he says "women ne'er should use art,"
> (And I own that I think that is true);
> Then I ask--ever taking your part--
> "Why, now, what <u>are</u> poor women to do?"
>
> My sweet Jane's not so young as she was;
> Thirty-two she'll see never again,
> And beauty and freshness will pass--
> Ay--even from my exquisite Jane!"[20]

The speaker continues in this vein for nine more stanzas. Because the humor in the poem derives from the cleverness of the hypocritical friend, the frustrated spinster Jane becomes the butt of the joke. However, the malice of her tormentor is equally reproachable, and she, too, is a target of the satire. Lady Stuart Wortley has manipulated two feminine stereotypes--the spinster and the flirt--for humorous effect. But the humor is of the variety that exploits the rivalry between women and deprecates female character. The spinster drew a lot of verbal attack; in this instance, a woman poet saw fit, at least, to attack the attacker as well as the victim.

Turning to the sentimental vein, we find representations of the spinster which suggest a nobility of spirit behind her pathetic failure to marry. In "The Secret Discovered" by Letitia Landon, also published in 1837, the heroine Elinore relinquishes her long-time fiancé to her younger sister Minna because she has discovered that the two are in love. Although she pretends to be relieved by her broken engagement, Elinore never marries, but devotes herself to

her aged parent.

> . . . beside their lonely hearth,
> She cheered her father's age,
> And made, for him, life's last dark leaf
> A sweet and sunny page.
> Did never other lovers come?
> They did--but came in vain;
> A heart like hers, when given once,
> Is given not again.[21]

Elinore adopted the life of self-denial which the sacrifice of the first marriage opportunity usually implied in nineteenth-century literature. It is to be hoped that, in real life, she might have accepted one of her later suitors. In its portrayal of the gentle, self-sacrificing old maid, this poem, though sympathetic, is entirely conventional.

Adelaide Anne Procter's "Three Evenings in a Life" (1858), on the other hand, takes a more critical stance, not on the nobility, but on the necessity, of such extreme self-sacrifice. The three evenings are three successive and critical Christmas Eves in the life of the spinster Alice. On the first, Alice declines an offer of marriage because in her girlhood she had promised her artist brother she would devote her own life to his happiness and his career, a decision which costs Alice a great deal of pain in carrying out. After the disappointed suitor leaves, Alice feels "a strange and wild regret" for the love, home, and children she has renounced. She even wonders, "What right had she to banish / A hope that God had given?"[22] The struggle within her soul resolves itself in a redoubled affection for her brother.

A year later, we discover that Alice's brother has himself gotten married. It soon becomes obvious to Alice that her sacrifice was unnecessary: her brother no longer needs her, and his wife is jealous of their closeness. This Christmas Eve, brother Herbert lies dying, and with his last breath he commends his wife Dora into Alice's care. She gives her solemn promise: "To Dora's life henceforward / She will devote her own" (p. 309).

In the third movement of the poem, Alice once again learns the uselessness of selfless devotion. On Christmas Eve, Dora marries Alice's former suitor, and Alice wanders out "forlorn" from her dead brother's home.

> Forlorn--nay, not so. Anguish
> Shall do its work at length;
> Her soul, passed through the fire
> Shall gain still purer strength.
> Somewhere there waits for Alice
> An earnest, noble part;
> And meanwhile God is with her--
> God, and her own true heart!
> (p. 315)

Certainly this conclusion is optimistic about Alice's future. At least she doesn't go and join Herbert in the grave, an event we might reasonably have anticipated in a nineteenth-century poem. Whether she will marry after all or devote herself to some other worthy cause is not revealed, but in any event, her life is far from over, and her faith in the virtue of self-sacrifice has been effectively challenged. The open-ended, hopeful conclusion to "Three Evenings in a Life" constitutes an unconventional representation of the spinster: as an independent and useful woman.

Adelaide Anne Procter was both a spinster and a feminist, a woman who not only wrote popular poetry but also helped to found the controversial English Woman's Journal and the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women. Perhaps because of her commitment to the cause of female self-dependence, she was one of the few women poets who dared on occasion to proselytize against female self-denial. The traditional figure of the modest, self-sacrificing spinster provided an opportune focus for the expression of Procter's unconventional point of view.

Besides age, a broken heart, or a self-sacrificing disposition, another of the reasons for a woman's not marrying was personal unattractiveness, and women poets did not shrink from exploring this circumstance. Of course, the

ugly woman has traditionally been a convenient source of laughter. But here, women poets generally declined to ridicule. In Eliza Cook's "Song of the Ugly Maiden," the speaker is the extreme opposite of the ideal English girl--almost, but not quite, to the point of parody.

> Oh! 'tis a saddening thing to be
> A poor and Ugly one:
> In the sand Time puts in his glass for me,
> Few sparkling atoms run.
> For my drawn lids bear no shadowing fringe,
> My locks are thin and dry;
> My teeth wear not the rich pearl tinge,
> Nor my lips the henna dye.[23]

The reader may be reminded of Shakespeare's sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," but Cook's ugly maiden does not merely fall short of the ideal; she stands in opposition to it, as a sort of anti-heroine. Potential suitors ignore her; ordinarily chivalrous men accord her neither courtesy nor respect. She feels herself an outcast: "Oh, Ugliness! thy desolate pain / Had served to set the stamp on Cain" (p. 304). She endures the "thoughtless jeers" and "laughing grin" of those who seem to imagine she is ugly by her own choice. So demoralized is she by scorn and neglect that she wishes she had never been born.

> For I stand in the blessed light of day
> Like a weed among the corn,--
> The black rock in the wide, blue sea--
> The snake in the jungle green. . . .
> Yet mine is the fate of lonelier state
> Than that of the snake or rock;
> For those who behold me in their path
> Not only shun, but mock.
> (p. 305)

Eliza Cook was not herself a conventionally attractive woman, as a glance at the frontispiece of her Poetical Works will reveal, and she never married. Although "Song of the Ugly Maiden" is not an excellent poem, it probably expresses a depth of bitterness which was Eliza Cook's own. Certainly it straightforwardly accuses (male) society of exhibiting a cruel and hypocritical attitude

towards women.

A better poem in this genre is Augusta Webster's "By the Looking-Glass," published in 1866. Webster's heroine is also a figure of pathos and pain, and a very sympathetic character. Standing by her mirror she soliloquizes at length about her fate:

> But the right of a woman is being fair,
> And her heart must starve if she miss that dower.
> For how should she purchase the look and the smile?
> And I have not had my part.[24]

As an amateur painter, she compensates by surrounding herself with beauty, feeding upon it "till beauty itself must seem / Me, my own, a part and essence of me, / My right and my being" (p. 151). But one look in the glass dissipates this hard-won sense of internal beauty. The psychological effect of her physical ugliness is a sensitivity to fancied mockery and scorn and a consequent withdrawal farther into the self. Yet she would most like "to forget me awhile, / Feeling myself but as one in the throng, / Losing myself in the joy of my youth!" (p. 151). Her self-consciousness is a burden she cannot shirk.

Once, when she was younger and still had hope, there was a man, but before he could declare the interest his eyes bespoke, he met her pretty sister. Soon the two had married and moved away, leaving the hopeless old maid alone with her "scatheless maidenly pride" (p. 155). Her only escape from the frustration and despair of her situation is the loss of consciousness afforded by sleep.

> Yes, I will sleep, for my wild thoughts stray
> Weakly, selfishly--yes, let them pass,
> Let self and this sadness of self leave me free,
> Lost in the peace of the night.
> (p. 160)

When the failure to marry was presented as a catastrophe, when the ideal of womanhood presupposed youth and beauty, then the ugly spinster was a pathetic figure indeed. Both Eliza Cook and Augusta Webster treated the predicament of such a woman with a degree of solemnity appropriate to the severity of her

social disability.

In a truly rare exception to the customary depiction of spinsters as miserable or ridiculous women, George Eliot in 1870 composed "Agatha," a respectful, even idealized portrait of a saintly and contented old maid. According to Eliot's journal, the poem was written "after a visit to that St. Märgen described at the beginning of the poem. There was really an aged woman among those green hills who suggested the picture of Agatha."[25] The idyllic setting of the poem, in the Catholic, Old World countryside, complements the presentation of Agatha, a devoutly religious and well-beloved woman of St. Märgen. Agatha shares with her two unmarried cousins the one-room cottage which the elderly couple who employed her for thirty years left to her when they died. To earn their living, the three old maids work for the neighbors in house and field, "Patching and mending, turning o'er the hay, / Holding sick children. . . ."[26] In return, the villagers see to it that they are never in distress, for they think of her as "one who surely made a link / 'Twixt faulty folk and God by loving both" (p. 58).

Of course, it must be remembered that Agatha's life is not that of an urban Englishwoman. Such a woman as Agatha seems less uncommon, perhaps, in a simple, rural setting, where it seems altogether fitting that the local folk should adore her. Nevertheless Eliot's idealized representation of the happy, useful old maid Agatha was truly extraordinary. The fact that it was based upon the life of a real woman may partially account for the poem's deviation from the nineteenth-century literary norm; the rest of the credit belongs to the decidedly unconventional imagination of George Eliot herself.

Mary Robinson's "The Wise-Woman" (1884) provides a sharp contrast with Eliot's "Agatha." The title of the poem is ironic, for the village old maid in this rural setting is a witch, who lives alone in a broken-down cottage,

with a leaky roof and a weedy garden and windows the village boys have shattered with stones. The villagers blame her for everything that goes wrong and once even dunked her in the pond. For her part, she does not protest against their accusations, but encourages their awe and fear. The narrator of the poem, who is more sophisticated than the wise-woman's rural neighbors, does not believe in witchcraft but wonders why the old woman should accept the role in which the ignorant villagers have cast her.

> This is the house. Lift up the latch--
> Faugh, the smoke and the smell!
> A broken bench, some rags that catch
> The drip of the rain from the broken thatch--
> Are these the wages of Hell?
>
> Is it for this she earns the fear
> And the shuddering hate of her kind?
> To moulder and ache in the hovel here,
> With the horror of death ever brooding near,
> And the terror of what is behind?

The narrator resolves the question by recognizing the overwhelming loneliness of "a woman poor and old, / No longer like to be courted again," whose feelings of neglect and powerlessness might compel her to sacrifice her very soul.

> Who sooner would, than slip from sight,
> Meet every eye askance;
> Whom threatened murder can scarce affright,
> Who sooner would live as a plague and a blight
> Than just be forgotten; perchance.[27]

Like George Eliot's Agatha, Mary Robinson's wise-woman also commands the respect of her neighbors, but at a terrible price. The New Arcadia, in which this poem appeared, was a piece of social protest, and in "The Wise-Woman" Mary Robinson depicted not only the misery of the poor and powerless but also the cruelty of society towards single women. If English old maids were occasionally grotesque, the poem suggests, perhaps society itself was to blame.

A second poem in The New Arcadia which deals with the spinster is "The Rothers," a tale of the rural aristocracy, rather than the rural poor. The old

maid in "The Rothers" is Miss May, a great-aunt, whose eccentricities are a bit ridiculous but whose essential goodness and devotion to her nieces far overshadow her foibles.

> --she would sigh,
> And clasp her hands, and swear "by God";
> Her black wig ever slipped awry,
> And quavered with a trembling nod;
> Her face was powdered very white,
> Her black eyes danced under brows of night.
>
> Such paint! Yet were I ever to feel
> Utterly lost, no saint I'd pray,
> But, crooked of ringlets and high of heel,
> I'd call to the rescue old Miss May:
> No haloed angel sweet and slender
> Were half so kind, so stanch, so tender.[28]

Miss May has renounced her single life in France in order to be a mother to her two orphaned wards, Florence and Maud Rother. Some twenty years later, both girls decide to marry, and Miss May is rewarded for her devotion by being dismissed like a superfluous servant.

> Homeless, after so many years
> Of sacrifice! Where could she go?
> But she, she smiled, choked back her tears,
> "Of course," she said, "it must be so,--
> So kind, her girls, to let her come
> Three months to each in her married home!"
> (p. 59)

The thoughtlessness and ingratitude of the adopted daughters is almost beyond belief. After her first three-month stay with Maud, Miss May, though seriously ill, is loaded into the back of a wagon and driven like a trussed calf to Florence's house; she dies on the way. The narrator of the poem, a neighbor of the Rothers, seems to be the only one in the countryside who is appalled. Like him, we the readers are intended to deplore the "murder" of poor old Miss May. The New Arcadia is melodramatic in tone, and the story of "The Rothers" is almost too outlandish to be genuinely moving. However, as a protest against the conventional expendability of maiden aunts, it deals with social reality,

and in its depiction of Miss May herself, it represents a spinster who is comprehensible and deserving of our respect as a human being.

By studying these little known poems, most of them written by nearly forgotten women of Queen Victoria's day, we can observe an instance of the phenomenon that literature does not always keep pace with life; for both men and women poets were slow to register changes in the lives of single women in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, a number of courageous and perceptive women poets like Adelaide Anne Procter, George Eliot, and Augusta Webster led the way. Procter exposed the inadequacy of a life devoted to others, who accept but do not truly require one's painful sacrifices, and suggested the alternative of self-sufficiency for the single woman. Eliot simply avoided the conventional representation of the spinster entirely, presenting the contented old maid Agatha within her own simple social context. And, of all the women poets, it was Webster who studied the dilemmas of spinsterhood with the greatest frequency and depth, striving always to expose social injustice and to elicit understanding and respect for single womanhood. Women writers like these triumphed over their times, by avoiding the levity and sentimentality which had previously characterized the literary stereotype of the spinster, and by transcending the idea of the unmarried woman as society's debris.

NOTES

[1] W. R. Greg, "Why Are Women Redundant?" National Review (April, 1862); rpt. in W. R. Greg, Literary and Social Judgments (Boston: Osgood, 1873).

[2] Frances Power Cobbe, "What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?" Fraser's Magazine (November, 1862); rpt. in Frances Power Cobbe, Essays on the Pursuits of Women (London: Emily Faithfull, 1863), p. 60.

[3] Eliza Cook, "Old Maids," Eliza Cook's Journal, 3 (October 26, 1850), 404.

[4] Susan Gorsky, "Old Maids and New Women: Alternatives to Marriage in Englishwomen's Novels, 1847-1915," Journal of Popular Culture, 7 (Summer, 1973), 72.

[5] Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 47.

[6] Cook, "Old Maids," p. 404.

[7] Katharine Moore, Cordial Relations: The Maiden Aunt in Fact and Fiction (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 2.

[8] Frances Power Cobbe, "Celibacy vs. Marriage," Fraser's Magazine (February, 1862); rpt. in Essays on the Pursuits of Women, p. 51.

[9] Quoted in Ray Strachey, The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain (London: G. Bell, 1928), p. 17.

[10] See, e.g., "Old Maids," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 112 (July, 1972), 94-108, on the compensations of spinsterhood.

[11] Cook, "Old Maids," p. 403.

[12] Eliza Cook, "A Brief Chapter on Old Maids," Eliza Cook's Journal, 1 (September 22, 1849), 222.

[13] Cobbe, "Celibacy vs. Marriage," p. 50.

[14] Dora Greenwell, "Our Single Women," North British Review, 36 (February, 1862), 62.

[15] Patricia Thomson, The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal, 1837-1873 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 117.

[16] Gorsky, p. 69.

[17] Jenni Calder, Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 165.

[18] Francoise Basch, Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 189.

[19] Arthur Symons, Collected Works (London: Martin Secker, 1924), II, 49. Further references to this poem will be from this edition and will be identified internally by line number.

[20] Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, "I Am Come But Your Spirits to Raise," in Keepsake (London: Longmans, 1837), pp. 30-31, 32.

[21] "L.E.L." [Letitia Elizabeth Landon], "The Secret Discovered," in Friendship's Offering (London: Smith, Elder, 1837), p. 324.

[22] Adelaide Anne Procter, Poems: Complete Edition, with an Introduction by Charles Dickens (London, 1866); rpt. New York: Worthington, 1889, pp. 302, 304. Further quotations from this poem will be identified internally by page number.

[23] Eliza Cook, Poetical Works (London: Frederick Warne, 1870), p. 303. Further quotations from this poem will be identified internally by page number.

[24] Augusta Webster, Dramatic Studies (London: Macmillan, 1866), p. 150. Further quotations from this poem will be identified internally by page number.

[25] George Eliot, The Writings of George Eliot, ed. J. W. Cross (Boston, 1907-1908); rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1970, XXV, 163.

[26] Ibid., XIX, 51. Further quotations from this poem will be identified internally by page number.

[15] Patricia Thomson, The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal, 1837-1873 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 117.

[16] Gorsky, p. 69.

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[26] Ibid., XIX, 51. Further quotations from this poem will be identified internally by page number.

[27] Mary Robinson, The New Arcadia and Other Poems (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884), pp. 80-81, 85.

[28] Ibid., p. 57. Further quotations from this poem will be identified internally by page number.